

## 11. THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD *ARDEOTIS NIGRICEPS*: ARE THEY DISAPPEARING IN KARNATAKA?<sup>1</sup>

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The Great Indian Bustard is a highly endangered bird, and accorded Schedule I protection in the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. The bird, common and widespread once in the plains of the Indian peninsula, has become very rare in most of the region due to habitat loss and hunting (Ali and Rahmani 1983). Besides many other states, Karnataka is also known to hold a small population of the Bustard. The Bustard was reported to be widely distributed in the state; however, no evidence of any sightings of the birds was available between 1940 and 1970. Neginhal (1980) reported sightings of a few birds during 1974 at Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary. The birds had been sighted in and around the Sanctuary up to 1982 (Neginhal 1980; Ali and Rahmani 1983; Karanth and Singh 1990). Rahmani and Manakadan (1990) reported the occurrence of Bustard as unconfirmed reports based on personal communication with many researchers in Bijapur, Raichur, Dharwad, Bellary, Chitradurga, Tumkur, Hassan and Mysore, and further they stated that the Bustard is definitely known to exist in Dharwad. They also estimated the Bustard number as 30 to 40 for the state. Neginhal (1997) also reported the Bustard nest and egg from the Ranibennur in 1997. Ghorpade (1996) reported the bird from Hagedal in Gadag district. Bhat *et al.* (2005) based on secondary sources compiled the Bustard status from 1981 to 2005 in Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary, which showed regular sighting of five birds from 1981 to 1997, and highest of 14 birds in 1990; since 1998 the number of birds have drastically gone down in the Sanctuary, however, one bird was reported in 2003.

HNK surveyed the entire state for mammals from 2001 to 2004. During this period, HNK travelled c. 30,000 km across different talukas of all districts of the state, and 9,853 km of forest area either on jeep or motorcycle. The authors interviewed 1,401 people, including Forest Department officials, shepherds, villagers and others interested in wildlife. The survey carried out in all regions of Karnataka, including those areas where the Great Indian Bustard does not occur. During the survey HNK also collected information on a few other birds. VM also surveyed the Gadag, Haveri, Koppal, Bellary and Raichur districts during 1999 to 2004 for the

Bustards. This note gives an account of the earlier records and recent observations on Bustard sightings by the authors.

During the survey no Bustards were sighted in the drier plains of the entire state. However, the photos of an egg taken in 2002 (Panchalingegowda, ACF, Tumkur) at Sira, Tumkur district, resembles the egg of a Bustard. This is the only possible evidence of occurrence of the Bustard in the southern districts of the state. However, no evidence could be sought for the direct sighting in the southern districts. Even the direct sightings in northern districts are only transitory records (Samad 2006). The forest personnel in Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary have sighted no bustards since 2000, in and around the Sanctuary. However, sighting of a solitary bustard in a patch of *Acacia catechu* adjoining the bustard plots in Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary by the staff was reported to VM on June 06, 2004. Apart from the above sight record, the interview with the local people in the district and around the Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary also revealed no sightings of the Bustard.

VM sighted a solitary bird between Koppal and Gadag, and just 2 km before Bannikoppa station on December 08, 2001, while travelling in a train. Since the train was slow the bird could be easily identified as the Great Indian Bustard. The bird was not shy and tolerated the train, in fact it moved a couple of steps with its typical cocky posture and bent down to feed. The bird was nearly 50 to 60 m from the tracks, in a groundnut field. The bird was sighted at a distance of <1 km where earlier a herd of more than eight blackbuck (*Antelope cervicapra*) were seen.

The above sight records reflect that bustard sightings in the State are infrequent. The situation appears alarming and needs immediate attention. It is crucial to provide and improve the habitat of the bird, especially at Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary, which is known to have good numbers of the bustard.

The recent disappearance of the bird has been attributed to habitat manipulation, i.e. changing the open undulating grassland with little scrub forest into Eucalyptus plantations (Neginhal 1997, 2005). Neginhal (2005) also reported the details of the habitat change in Ranibennur

Blackbuck Sanctuary over a period of one century, and also its impact on different wild animals. Regular monitoring of the bird in a large spatial area is required, and also the monitoring of the habitat, to know more about the population trend.

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## 12. RECENT RECORDS OF YELLOW-EYED PIGEON *COLUMBA EVERSMANNI* IN RAJASTHAN<sup>1</sup>

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The Yellow-eyed Pigeon *Columba evermanni* is a rare winter/passage migrant in the Indian subcontinent. It breeds in Central Asia from the southern Aral sea south to north-east Iran and Tien Shan Mountains and northern Afghanistan east to Lake Balkhash and far western China, and winters in southern parts of its breeding range south to Pakistan and north-west India (Gibbs *et al.* 2001).

The species is classified as vulnerable because it has declined rapidly in the past as a result of changing agricultural practices and hunting in its wintering grounds, and possibly habitat loss in its breeding grounds (BirdLife International 2000).

HSS was fascinated by the species after reading an article in the *Hornbill* (Singh 1980). However, it was only after his visit to Harike in Punjab with Per Undeland (PU) that he really started looking for the species in Rajasthan. Incidentally, PU highlighted the presence of large flocks at Harike by writing about the species (Undeland 1997) and reporting to the Oriental Bird Club (Crosby 1995; Robson 1996, 1997).

On February 17, 2001 while censusing vultures, HSS and Rishad Naoraji flushed c.70 birds at Camel Breeding

Farm, Jor-Bir, Bikaner (28° 04' N, 73° 23' E) in the cold morning from two-three *Salvadora persica* trees. The birds were quite concealed in the canopy of the trees that they almost missed seeing them. The pigeons burst out of the trees when they unknowingly drove their jeep too close to them. Although the pigeons rapidly flew away there was no mistaking their diagnostic white rumps. After flying about for one or two minutes they settled on about four *Salvadora persica* trees.

Again at Jor-Bir c. 100 birds were observed foraging on the ground on December 18, 2001. The flock was extremely wary and after flying away settled on three or four *Salvadora persica* trees. Once settled they were lost in the canopy of the trees; only those birds which perched on the tree tops were visible.

Incidentally, R.G. Sonia, a senior officer of the Forest Department of Rajasthan, presented a set of photographs of the species to HSS. While posted at Bikaner, he photographed a mixed flock of about ten Rock Pigeons *Columba livia*, and fifteen Yellow-eyed Pigeons *C. evermanni* at Jor-Bir on November 11, 1995 when they came to drink water at a pool.

As an aside, this open area with scattered *Salvadora persica*, *Prosopis cineraria* and *Zizyphus mauritiana* has